

Planning guide for further education colleges

Commentary and checklist



Introduction

Proposals to substantially expand FE Colleges opening from 15 June must be handled carefully to manage risk.

This joint commentary and checklist will assist those working in colleges when they develop their plans for wider opening in consultation with unions, staff and learners.

This checklist has been developed jointly and is based on current government and public health advice (1 June 2020). It is intended to help ensure that colleges meet their duties to assess risks and take steps to remove or control them. As the science develops, government guidance will be kept under review and may be revised.

The Department for Education (DfE) has issued the following key documents which are aimed at helping principals to prepare for wider reopening of their college:

Guidance including a checklist of the conditions that need to be met to reopen colleges to a wider cohort:

Guidance for further education and skills providers

Guidance which sets out a range of protective measures to be put in place before increasing on-site contact:

Implementing protective measures in education and childcare settings

Colleges should feel confident that they have implemented the steps in a way which will reassure staff that their health and safety, and that of the learners, will be protected.

We recognise that some of the DfE guidance is not college specific, referring to schools and other educational settings. Colleges have specific conditions which have to be taken into account. Learners in colleges are a very large and diverse population. They serve a vast age range of learners, including a disproportionately high number of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, a higher than average number of learners with vulnerabilities such as special education, health or social care needs and a high proportion of learners from BAME backgrounds. The sheer size of colleges, usually with several campuses means that there is a great deal of movement of both staff and learners, often needing to use public transport.

Colleges have been advised to operate in the same way as other workplaces and maintain social distancing in learning/study areas and in movement around the college. This means that colleges must determine the numbers of

learners they admit maintaining the current advice of social distancing of 2-metres where possible between learners and between learners and staff. The government guidance states that the total number of learners attending at any one time should not exceed a quarter of 16-19 year olds on the first year of a two-year programme, allowing for learners in this group already in attendance. This is in addition to vulnerable young people and the children of critical workers (outside of the cohort mentioned above).

In most learning/study areas this will mean fewer than 15 learners present at one time. It is for college leaders to make this decision, to keep their staff, their learners, their families and their communities, safe.

The Further Education unions continue to press government to work with them to create the conditions for a safe return to college based on the principles and tests set out below, with safety and welfare of learners and staff as the paramount principle.

- No increase in learners on site until full rollout of a national test and trace scheme.
- A national COVID-19 education taskforce with government, unions and education stakeholders to agree statutory guidance for safe reopening of colleges.
- Consideration of the specific needs of vulnerable learners and families facing economic disadvantage.
- Additional resources for enhanced site cleaning, PPE and risk assessments.

The joint trade unions have also provided their local union representatives with additional guidance:

Five Ws: Question areas to inform discussions about a return to work in FE branches

Questions colleges may wish to consider are suggested within this document. If you are not yet satisfied, you should address this concern before you judge it is feasible and safe to re-open. There is a checklist of these questions on the next page for you to use – but please read all the supplementary advice and questions in the rest of the document before you decide whether to answer Yes or No to each of them.

Also note that this document has been developed as planning guidance and does not identify specific measures to be taken in each situation. Also note that it is not exhaustive – every college is unique and, whilst there will be many common features, each will need to consider any additional relevant risk factors beyond what is set out in this joint commentary and checklist, for example, when a high incidence of infections develops in a particular geographical area. The AoC and the unions will advise their members further where advice is sought.

Risk assessment outcomes should be shared with staff, and, colleges should publish the results on their website (government guidance currently expects all employers with over 50 workers to do so). Students and staff need to be aware of the identified risks and the protective measures in place to protect them from harm, particularly where there is a specific risk assessment tailored to their role (e.g. first aiders, catering staff).

Finally, although the language of ‘re-opening’ has been used, it is recognised that during lock-down many college sites have remained open, albeit on a limited basis whilst others have been closed. There is an acknowledgment that colleges are at various stages of physical site opening.

Our advice to colleges

The starting point should be the local agreement of a COVID-19 risk management framework that sets out health and safety (H&S) arrangements for the college during the phased return to the workplace, the H&S responsibilities and duty holders, who the competent persons are and any H&S training needs across the organisation.

The risk management framework should identify where and when the unions will be consulted in the risk management process and the specific risk assessments being developed.

Under the Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1977 (as amended) Act (where unions are recognised) and the Health and Safety (Consultation with Employees) Regulations 1996 (as amended) (where unions are not recognised) Health and Safety reps have the legal right to be consulted on the risk assessment and future amendments. Also required is a reporting system to be in place to allow staff to urgently alert college leaders to any shortcomings in arrangements or where systems aren’t functioning as they should be.

Summary of checklist steps

Overall

Is there a risk assessment for re-opening of your college?

Are you satisfied that it addresses all key issues?

Yes/No

Step 1: Preparing the site

Health and safety check of the building

Are you satisfied that these checks will be complied with in time for re-opening?

Yes/No

Cleaning and hygiene

Are you satisfied with the cleaning and hygiene arrangements that will operate from when re-opening begins?

Yes/No

Movement around the college to reduce contact

Are you satisfied that staff and learners will be able to move safely through the corridors and up and down stairs from the date when the college opens more widely?

Yes/No

Site examination

Are you satisfied that these arrangements will be in place in time for re-opening and they will work on a practical level?

Yes/No

Step 2: Staffing considerations

Audit of staff

Are you satisfied that safe staffing levels will be in place from when the college starts to open more widely?

Yes/No

Are senior staff, safeguarding and caretaker/cleaning staff available?

Have you considered the risk should any of these key staff be unavailable and at what point the college would have to close? Are you satisfied that a safe environment can be maintained from when the college starts to open more widely?

Yes/No

Step 3: Teaching and specialist needs and requirements

Are you satisfied that adequate arrangements for group sizes, social distancing and PPE where necessary will be in place when re-opening begins?

Yes/No

Step 4: Practical steps to reduce risk

Are you satisfied that hazards have been resolved in time for the start of re-opening?

Yes/No

Step 5: New working practices

Are you satisfied that these issues have been adequately addressed before re-opening begins?

Yes/No

Step 6: Staff communication and planning

Are you satisfied that this issue has been adequately addressed before extended opening begins?

Yes/No

Step 7: Managing learner and staff wellbeing and mental health

Are you satisfied that appropriate measures will be in place when the college begins to open more widely?

Yes/No

Step 1: Preparing the Site

Health and safety check of the building

DfE have issued guidance including a checklist of the conditions that need to be met to reopen colleges to a wider cohort:

Guidance for further education and skills providers

Guidance which sets out a range of protective measures to be put in place before increasing on-site contact:

Implementing protective measures in education and childcare settings

If buildings have been empty for any time there may be risks related to water safety, pest control and waste disposal. Machinery and equipment may have been idle for a long time and will need to be thoroughly checked prior to use.

Questions to consider:

Are you confident about the safety of the following areas?

- hot and cold water systems
- gas safety
- fire safety
- kitchen equipment
- specialist equipment used by learners (e.g. for access/mobility/changing)
- technical equipment and machinery used by learners
- security including access control and intruder alarm systems
- ventilation

Are you satisfied that these checks will be complied with in time for re-opening?

Yes/No

Cleaning and hygiene

Questions to consider:

- Is soap and warm water available at all times, with systems in place to ensure continuity of supply of soap and hand sanitiser?
- Will the college provide suitable measures to enable learners and staff arriving to safely queue, at a 2-metre distance from each other, and to access the hand sanitiser/hand cleansing facilities on arrival and before eating?
- Are there clear reminders to staff and students (i.e. signage) to promote regular hand washing?
- Will staffing levels (and PPE where appropriate) allow for enough staff to support those learners in specialist settings to do this who are unable to do it independently?
- Are bins available in every learning/study area and other frequently used areas? Will bins be regularly emptied and sanitized throughout the day? Are you confident that this will take place and have you considered who will empty them during the day?
- Are rearrangements in place to keep every learning/study area supplied with tissues?
- Will hand dryers be regularly cleaned? Have you considered disconnecting and replacing with paper towels and bins?
- Will drinking fountains be taken out of use?
- Will only rooms with good ventilation be used? e.g. ability to open windows, fresh-air sources, air-conditioning?
- Will doors be kept open where possible to aid ventilation? (without causing additional risks)
- Will air conditioning systems not be used unless it can be confirmed that there is no additional risk?
- Will all areas of the premises be thoroughly cleaned daily with particular focus on surfaces that are touched by multiple people such as photocopiers, door handles, table/counter tops, computers including mouse and keyboard, light switches telephones, chairs, bannisters, shared learning resources, library books, specialist equipment for SEND learners, toilets and toilet handles, sinks, taps and other areas touched regularly, with additional cleaning during the day as necessary?
- Will each learning/study area be provided with appropriate resources, e.g. hand sanitiser, gloves and disinfectant spray, in case a learner or staff member coughs or sneezes on a piece of equipment?
- Is there capacity amongst the cleaning staff to meet these requirements?

Checklist for colleges

- Is there an appropriate isolation area identified for anyone who displays symptoms whilst on site? Has a safe route to exit the premises from this space been identified?

Are you satisfied with the cleaning and hygiene arrangements that will operate from when re-opening begins?

Yes/No

Movement around the college

The main suggestion from DfE is for corridors to be used on a one-way basis.

Questions to consider:

- Is there an appropriate system for recording which students and staff are on site, and subsequent movements on and off site throughout the day?
- Will a one-way system be introduced? If not is there an adequate alternative?
- What arrangements are proposed for safe movement on staircases?
- What arrangements are in place for use of lifts – can social distancing be achieved?
- How will staff and learners be made aware of the new arrangements, with particular reference to those with special needs?
- Is there a process of monitoring in place to ensure that the systems are being complied with? Will an appropriate member of staff be on duty at all times?
- Are other measures needed in corridors, for example floor markings or removal of furniture or learners walking in single file?
- Is there provision for the movement of learners around the college who may need additional assistance from an adult?
- How will learners and staff keep 2-metres apart? Exceptionally, should it not be possible to enable a 2-meter distance, has consideration been made to reduce any potential risks e.g. hand-cleansing facilities are available, ventilation is adequate?
- What arrangements are proposed around access to toilets to ensure no overcrowding?
- What signage will be displayed to support these new systems?
- What arrangements have been made to keep students in small groups that mix as little as possible with other groups?
- Have current emergency evacuation plans

been reviewed with consideration to any modifications made which impact on movement around the building?

Are you satisfied that staff and learners will be able to move safely through the corridors and up and down stairs from the date when the college opens more widely?

Yes/No

Site Examination

Colleges are advised to examine the learning/study areas available and any other rooms that can be used as temporary learning spaces.

DfE suggests that essential resources may need to be moved from one learning/study area to another where classes are split and that non-washable resources, other than books, should be taken away/inaccessible.

Questions to consider:

- Has the site been assessed to determine what the maximum capacity is and proportion of learners and staff that can be accommodated to allow safe distancing?
- Have staff offices been appropriately reconfigured to conform to social distancing guidance and have staff been made aware of this? Where movement of furniture etc. is not possible, are staff aware of how their offices should be used to enable social distancing (e.g. this may involve sitting to face away from colleagues)?
- Given that classes will be split, can resources be split between two learning/study areas?
- Will additional resources be needed to ensure that both classes have what they need?
- Are staff clear that there will be no unannounced external visitors to the college at this time, with planned visits from external visitors limited to those deemed essential and approved by the senior leadership team?

Are you satisfied that these arrangements will be in place in time for re-opening and that they will work on a practical level?

Yes/No

Step 2: Staffing considerations

Audit of staff

An audit of how many staff are available, both teaching and support staff, needs to be conducted. This includes how many staff are needed in line with current guidelines stating that only a quarter of 16 to 19-year-old learners are allowed in the college at one time.

Questions to consider:

- Has reasonable consideration been given to pregnant staff and those with underlying health conditions that make them vulnerable, or who live with or care for vulnerable or shielding household members or those aged over 70 to allow them to continue to work from home? The DfE advises that if 'vulnerable' as opposed to 'extremely vulnerable' staff cannot work from home 'they should be offered the safest available on-site roles'.
- Will there be a senior leader, first aider, Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL), caretaker and sufficient cleaning staff on duty at all times?
- Are you satisfied that staff movement between classes has been minimised?
- Is it clear to all staff and learners that only staff and learners who are not exhibiting symptoms, and who do not need to self-isolate, may attend college?
- Is it clear that staff and learners who exhibit symptoms must be sent home immediately and have a test to see if they have COVID-19 and depending on the result follow relevant PHE advice on isolation and return?
- Has an Equality Impact Assessment been carried out against protected characteristics (of staff and learners)? For example, evidence from the Office for National Statistics shows a greater impact of COVID-19 on Black communities with a disproportionate number of deaths being recorded.
- Are arrangements in place for safe induction of new staff during this period?
- Will food be available on site and have considerations been made as to how meals will be served and are there sufficient catering staff?

- Is there a procedure to monitor and review staffing levels and manage this should staffing levels fall to levels where safety cannot be assured?

Are you satisfied that safe staffing levels will be in place from when the college starts to open more widely?

Yes/No

Additional precautions

Questions to consider:

- Where assessed as appropriately required, is adequate PPE available and training given on its use and disposal?
- Where a 2 metre distance cannot be maintained, will PPE be available for emergency situations, for example when a learner develops symptoms whilst on site?
- Will requests be reasonably considered on a case-by-case basis where a member of staff wishes to wear a face covering?

Are you satisfied that adequate arrangements for group sizes, social distancing and PPE where necessary will be in place when re-opening begins?

Yes/No

Step 3: Teaching and specialist needs and requirements

Questions to consider:

- How many learners can each individual learning/study area safely accommodate to ensure that they and staff remain 2-metres apart on entry and departure and during the lesson? This needs to take account of the additional staff numbers in classes with SEND learners. How many people altogether will be in a learning/study area should be the measure.
- What areas are safe to use for different purposes than usual to aid social distancing?
- Has account been taken of the fact that some staff, in particular support staff, normally work at close proximity to individual learners and how this work can continue in a safe manner?
- In specialist colleges, given the level of adult support required for learners, what is a safe number of people to have in a learning/study area and how is this determined?
- In specialist colleges, where social distancing will be impossible, what measures are in place to protect staff and learners?
- Can parents of SEND learners be reassured that their child will still be working with, or have access to, their key worker/learning support assistant?
- Is the college prepared to consider attendance on a rotational basis in order to reduce class sizes?
- Will learners be told not to come to college if there is a shortage of staff for their particular class?
- Will new employees be brought into the workplace in smaller groups prior to restarting?
- Have individual risk assessments and discussion with parents/carers taken place and been agreed by the date when re-opening begins, to ensure that any provision required by a learner in order to attend college is safely in place?
- Will there be social distancing measures in place for visitors from external support agencies visiting learners at college?
- If local authorities cannot provide additional trauma support for learners can another provider be quality assured, and risk assessed in time for when the college begins to open more widely?
- Where local authorities cannot, despite 'best endeavours' provide the support listed in an education, health and care (EHC) plan, can learner safety in college be guaranteed? E.g. behaviour support.
- Will there be clear guidelines on entry to college about the procedures in place for essential visitors from external agencies visiting learners at the college (e.g. educational psychologists, child and adult mental health services (CAMHS), behavioural support, advisory teachers etc.)?

Are you satisfied that these issues have been considered and that measures covering these areas will be in place in time for re-opening?

Yes/No

Are you satisfied that the arrangements to operate from when the college opens more widely are safe for learners, teachers and teaching and learning support assistants?

Yes/No

Step 4: Practical steps to reduce risk

Questions to consider:

- Are measures in place to protect staff who may at times need to use physical interventions to protect learners from harming themselves or others?
- Has consideration been given to staggering arrival times where appropriate?
- Has consideration been given to staggering break times where possible to minimise contact and mixing?
- Is there sufficient staffing to monitor the safe arrival and departure of learners at varying times?
- Are there clear guidelines on entry to the college about the procedures in place for essential visitors to the college?
- Have social distancing measures for visitors to the college been considered?
- Will visitors working closely with learners be offered PPE where necessary?
- Will enough staff be available (and able to socially distance) to assist learners who are anxious?
- What arrangements are in place to ensure that meals can be safely prepared and served?
- Have staff had appropriate H&S information, instruction and training in any new safe systems of work and understand the risks and controls that should be in place?

Are you satisfied that these issues have been adequately addressed before re-opening begins?

Yes/No

Step 5: New working practices

The DfE advises regularly and rigorously reinforcing new rules and behaviour for both staff and students, and in relation anyone else allowed on site.

Questions to consider:

- Has guidance and training been provided for staff to ensure they understand, and can enforce, the new routines and support learners in understanding them and are they familiar with revised physical arrangements, well in advance of when wider opening begins?
- Have individual learner risk assessments be put in place for all learners who exhibit anti-social behaviour before a decision is made about admitting them under the new arrangements?
- Have compassionate and proportionate behaviour policies that protect health and safety, while also supporting learners who may exhibit problematic behaviours as a response to trauma they may have experienced during lockdown, been considered by the time wider opening begins?
- Has consideration been given to learning support assistants working in very close proximity to individual learners, and how can this work continue in a safe manner?
- Do essential contractors, including those who deliver food, understand how they may access the premises and what precautions are expected of them while they are on site?
- Are catering staff aware of new safe working practices?
- Has consideration been given regarding the use of public transport and where possible avoiding peak time travel for staff and students?

Are you satisfied that these issues have been adequately addressed before re-opening begins?

Yes/No

Step 6: Staff communication and planning

Questions to consider:

- Will senior staff be visibly present around college during the day?
- Are staff contact details, including emergency contact details, up to date?
- Are staff aware of and engaging with the established forms of communication?
- For staff with limited access to those forms of communication (e.g. email), have other arrangements been made?
- For staff with issues that may impair their ability to engage in communications (e.g. language, disability), have other arrangements been made?
- What arrangements will be put in place to ensure regular staff feedback on arrangements?
- Has a mechanism been put in place to demonstrate how employers are responding to feedback?
- Has time been identified for staff to work together to prepare teaching, particularly to adjust their teaching of practical lessons, without the use of shared physical resources?
- Has support been given to teaching assistants to prepare for supporting learners?
- How will staff maintain continuity of learning and support as learners begin to return, but have additional periods of time away?

Are you satisfied with ongoing communication arrangements?

Yes/No

Step 7: Managing learner and staff wellbeing and mental health

It is recognised that college closures may have caused significant mental health difficulties for some learners and some may have suffered a bereavement. Staff may be similarly affected.

Questions to consider:

- Does the college recognise its duties under H&S law to protect the mental as well as physical health of staff and students?
- What guidance will be given to staff on how to support learners?
- What pastoral support services will be available?
- Are counselling services available for staff and learners who may need support?
- How will the college monitor workload at this time to ensure a reasonable work/life balance for staff?
- What arrangements will be in place for learners with underlying health conditions who cannot attend when the rest of their group may be in college?
- Has consideration been given to the impact on changes to staff workloads whether working at home or at college?
- Are you satisfied that the college will be able to operate with the staffing available and without unreasonably increasing the pressure on staff when re-opening begins?

Are you satisfied that appropriate measures will be in place when the college begins to open more widely?

Yes/No